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ABSTRACT

The most significant factor in developing the video design of a telecourse must always be the needs of the students who will view the program. In developing videotapes for a writing telecourse at a Texas community college, the instructors attempted to design programs to meet the special cognitive and affective needs of its nontraditional audience. Nontraditional students are holistic thinkers; that is, they are open to learning when they can first see an overall content in which to place what they are studying. The telecourse's use of a narrative line provides a complete rhetorical context for writing skills for these students. Nontraditional students also have a strong need for social interchange and sense of community. While this characteristic is hard to deal with in a telecourse, exposing the audience to the acting ensemble in each program is an attempt at least to model for students the sense of community they need. The traditional telecourse presenter resembles the professor-lecturer, which does not work well with nontraditional students. Other special qualities of nontraditional students include (1) a lack of confidence in their academic and writing abilities, (2) one or more negative experiences with an English course, (3) poor writing attitudes, and (4) utilitarian motives for taking the course. Telecourses should try to accommodate the needs of their audience in the same way that on-campus courses have changed to accomodate the needs of their students. (HTH)

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Reaching Adult Learners through Public Television

Harryette Stover

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Reaching Adult Learners Through Public Television
by
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The most significant factor in working out the video design of a telecourse must always be the needs of the students who will view the programs. In the cognitive domain, of course, telecourse students need the same kinds of learning and skills that students in the classroom will. In the affective domain, telecourse students differ demonstrably from on-campus students and should be treated accordingly. In developing the videotapes for The Write Course, the design team attempted to design programs to meet the special cognitive and affective needs of our target student population.

We know that our students fall into the broad category of non-traditional students, so we applied what research tells us about these students to our special task. In Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations in the Teaching of Writing (1977), she points out that "The beginning writer does not know how writers behave." By showing how experienced writers attack concrete writing problems, we are teaching students how writers behave. We are showing them the kind of behavior we wish them to emulate. The dramatic format allows this to happen while simultaneously presenting subject matter. Since we are interested primarily in the writing process, showing that process at work repeatedly should be a prime teaching device.

Lynn Troyka's research (1982) indicates that one characteristic of non-traditional students is that they are holistic thinkers. DCCCD research (1979) corroborates this finding by showing that telecourse students are more often field-dependent thinkers than field-independent. Troyka (p. 259) contends that this means that such students "are open to learning when they can first see an overall content in which to place what

they are studying. . . ." Thus our use of a narrative line which provides a complete rhetorical context for the writing skills examined is geared to our field-dependent students. They will see writing as a whole rather than as an isolated example of some specific element.

Troyka also points out that non-traditional students are highly social, with a strong need for social interchange. She says (p. 256) they "concretely need to feel a sense of community, of belonging to a group. . . They need to be friends, and they need to have friends. Only then can they feel relaxed and safe enough to learn." This characteristic is difficult to deal with in a telecourse, but we are attempting at least to model for students the sense of community which they need. Exposure to the acting ensemble in each program give students some of the social context which they need. They hear the less experienced writers in the group voice the fears and frustrations which they feel and they will hear the experienced writers respond supportively. The dramatic format also allows the characters to be real enough to be accessible to students, a characteristic which Troyka's research indicates is essential in teachers of non-traditional students. Because the characters are in an informal environment, they can use language familiar to our students. The less experienced writers in the cast ask, naturally and straightforwardly, the kinds of questions students usually ask about the lesson topic. The more experienced writers answer these questions in everyday language and, furthermore, simply by taking the questions seriously are more accessible to students than many traditional college professors are. The main point is that non-traditional students must have a comfortable environment in which to learn. The use of sympathetic characters in a familiar television format is one version of a "comfortable" environment.

The traditional telecourse presenter, it must be noted, is closer to the professor-lecturer model, which Troyka's research (1982, p. 256) shows does not work well with non-traditional students. As Troyka describes them,

> These students are the ones who did not "get it" in high school; they are the ones who do not learn well from traditional lectures in the classroom; they are the ones who do not eradicate writing errors solely by doing grammar exercises in a workbook; and they are the ones who are confused or even insulted when teachers are inaccessible, detached, or unfriendly.

If on-campus teaching methods have changed to accommodate these students, should we not try to accommodate their needs in a telecourse designed especially for them? That is precisely what our format attempts to do.

In addition to these global characteristics of non-traditional students, some of the special qualities I have observed in telecourse students over the past eight years are:

1. They lack self-confidence in their academic abilities in general and in their writing abilities in particular. Although some very recent high school graduates take the course because campus sections are closed, most have been out of school for at least a few years and are concerned about their ability to do the work. Many people take this course as their first college course, so we must multiply the fears by the usual amount of adjustment needed for going to college. I get calls at the beginning of every semester from students (usually women) who mainly need reassurance. Our students are not dumb or incapable, but they think they are. We need to help them to see their life experiences as pluses not minuses in a composition course. Since they have been out of school for a while, our students are easily intimidated by jargon and academic-sounding language.

The character of Cassie helps us address this type of fear and frustration. We show Cassie growing in self-confidence as she realizes that her out-of-school experiences are valuable sources of ideas for writing. She also shows very explicitly that a writing class can help students in other classes.

2. Many of our students have had bad experiences in English classes before and will come to this course expecting the worst. They will expect to be told how they must write rather than to be given strategies for self-development as a writer. They will expect rivers of red ink, pages of awk, sp, and p from their instructors rather than intelligent and constructive help. They might, in fact, get that, but we can at least show the other model in the character of gwyn.

3. Some of our students think that there is really no use for writing, that the course they are enrolled in is just another hurdle constructed by sadistic college administrators to make it tough to get a college degree. Fred represents this attitudinal stance fairly well; his problem is not that he can't write but that he doesn't want to.

4. Some of our students have enrolled in the course primarily to further their careers. They have gone as far as they can go without good writing skills, so their motivation is very utilitarian. While this is certainly a valid reason for wanting to learn to write, I would hope to broaden their horizons by emphasizing that writing also can be personally fulfilling. Curt is our spokesman for this group of students.

5. Taking a course by TV is very hard on students in many ways. They are isolated, often lacking both the camaraderie of the usual class setting and even familial support. Sometimes families and friends help, but I often get papers reflecting a sense of guilt at "depriving" the family of

an hour of TV or missing Sunday School because of the broadcast. Students must be very motivated and disciplined. Jenny is of help here in her coming to grips with the very real problems and special problems writing involves. The main idea is to show students that their problems are common to all writers--all writers have trouble getting started and so on. Since they don't have classmates to commiserate with, our characters become in toto their friends and colleagues.

We are not, of course, solely concerned with the affective side of our students. But we do know that students like ours do not learn well unless their psychological as well as intellectual needs are considered. Without intending to make the course into a therapy session, the designers did intend to address these perceived student needs in a way which is, as far as we know, unique to telecourses.

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